

**International Women's Day 2013: Joint editorial by the EU Special Envoy to Somalia, Michele Cervone d'Urso, and implementing partners ILO Somalia, VSF-Germany and MRG.**



## **Women in Somalia: the heroes of a generation**

Women in Somalia face systemic discrimination and endemic violence, with devastating consequences for their lives. Despite difficult odds, Somali women have shown resilience. After enduring more than 20 years of war and hardship, of hunger and violence, of poverty and oppression, the country's future lies in their hands. Today is a special *International Women's Day* here in Somalia: women are finally looking to a brighter future, supported by greater stability in parts of the country and authorities attempting to rebuild the social contract between the State and its people. But we cannot rest in our laurels, women have yet to find their voice in society.

Violence against women and girls affects all societies. It is the most widespread human rights violation of our times, claiming millions of victims each year. Somalia is a case in point: the war has altered the gender roles, with women often taking the lead role in providing for families' livelihoods, as well as continuing as the main caregivers, even where men are present. But the basic values attached to gender identities have remained unchanged. Despite their increased economic role and contributions to clan activities, Somali women remain largely excluded from decision-making structures and are facing an alarming increase in rape and sexual abuse despite the security gains.

Together with our implementing partners, the EU has continuously enhanced access to justice for women. For instance, the EU has supported the establishment of Women's Lawyers Associations which has led to the appointment last year of the first women Deputy Attorney Generals in the country. Through these efforts and our support to Legal Clinics, Bar Associations and Women's umbrella organizations, assistance has been given to many Somali women. Moreover, the EU supports the *Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC)* in the country that are "one stop centres" providing care services for rape victims.

It will take time to improve the situation of the Somali women and girls. But Somalia is on the move. The Somalia Federal Government has set the example by nominating Fawzia Yusuf Haji Adan to become the first female Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Maryam Qasim as Minister of Public Services. Women of substance taking up key roles: a source of inspiration for many Somalis that change is coming.

Change will be a long process but it can start with the "New Deal" Somalia is engaged in. This is not merely an artificial planning construct or another tool to devote more attention to women. It's about changing lives and giving hope where there was none. It is about empowering Somali women and delivering them a "new deal". This will be at the heart of the Brussels conference on Somalia in September 2013.

The EU is equally focusing on women's participation in Somalia's economy. "*We know that anywhere in the world, where women prosper, societies prosper. In the interest of everyone is to include women in every part of society*" stated recently Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The EU is translating these aspirations into concrete action by supporting a series of civil society projects promoting gender equality at all levels of the society, civic education on women's rights issues, and policies to foster women's entrepreneurship in order to enable and empower them through skills development and association building.

Of course, women's and girls' rights start at school. We do believe that a woman who is denied a decent education is denied equality. As the largest donor in the sector, girls' access to education is a top priority for the EU. This priority has been streamlined in all the EU education programmes through several initiatives such as the creation of *girl friendly facilities* in schools, the support to female teachers training and the recruitment of diaspora gender advisors who are embedded in the Ministries of Education.

As Somalia enters a new era, long-standing violations of women's human rights must be addressed. The European Union stands ready to further support the realisation of a truly equitable state for men and women within Somalia. We have to be bold and ensure women are given the chance to build their country, to be part of the political process, and part of a fair and inclusive society.

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